

Hispanic leadership conference to address education, political activity Hispanic

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By Teresa Mask

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National leaders are convening for a Chicago conference this week to attract a new generation of Hispanic leadership and encourage voter registration.

U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige, Rep. Luis Guterrez, a Chicago Democrat, and Gaddi Vasquez, director of the U.S. Peace Corps, are among those speaking at the 20th annual United States Hispanic Leadership Institute Conference, which ends Sunday.

Today, participants will discuss immigration and terrorism. Specifically, they will debate how new policies, in light of Sept. 11, have affected immigration. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, an Evanston Democrat whose district covers much of Des Plaines and Rosemont, will serve as a panelist.

Another session will address race relations between blacks and Hispanics as new statistics indicate Hispanics are surpassing blacks as the most-populous minority group.

The overall theme of the conference focuses on education and political involvement, said Rey Gonzalez, chairman of the board of the Chicago-based U.S. Hispanic Leadership Institute.

"A lot of the focus is on youth and how they can get involved in their community," he said. "The important message we are trying to send is that they need to give back to their communities."

More than 3,000 Hispanic students, some from the suburbs, participated Friday in a rally to encourage leadership and unity.

"The goal is to get these students all fired up and ready to finish their studies, whether it be high school or college, so they can join community groups or political campaigns and get involved," said Dave Cordova, who is helping promote the conference, which is expected to attract 10,000 people during its four days.

Another goal is to encourage the students to register to vote so they can be involved in the political process. Even though the Hispanic population is growing in record numbers nationally, organizers of the conference say it means nothing if Hispanics aren't represented in positions where they have the power to make needed changes.